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THE SPIRIT OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY¹

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The desire to conserve and to strengthen evangelical Christianity in our day is evidence of a vigorous religious life. This solicitude is greatly needed in the transition period through which we are passing. But there is danger that the real spirit of evangelicalism may be missed.

In historical evangelicalism primary stress has been laid on the creation of a profound religious experience in the individual, rather than on the necessity of submitting to an authoritative system. Luther, Pietism, and the Methodist movement all represent this emphasis. We cannot point to a distinctive evangelical *theology* as differentiating evangelicalism from the types of Christianity which it opposed in Protestantism.

The spirit of evangelicalism is the spirit of persuasive appeal rather than that of citing an authoritative system. Whenever heresy-hunting or theological disputation is foremost, the spirit of evangelicalism is in danger of being lost. Evangelical Christianity may inspire a restatement of doctrine in our day.

There is widespread concern today lest evangelical Christianity may be weakened or lost. Serious discussions and controversies in Protestantism are being inspired by this concern. Charges are being made of a widespread apostasy from the evangelical faith, and Christians are being urged to make valiant battle against the forces which are alleged to be set in array against our precious inheritance. All who have at heart the welfare of religion in America recognize that evangelical Christianity has been a most important creative spiritual power. To conserve and to strengthen it means to avail ourselves of the momentum of a type of religion which has commanded general love and devotion.

But what *is* evangelical Christianity? It is currently defined in terms of certain theological doctrines; and it is assumed that, if these doctrines be kept intact, evangelical Christianity will be maintained in all its power. But even a casual survey reveals the fact that doctrinal tests tell us very little about the actual state of religious life. There are here

¹ An address given at the opening of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, October 4, 1922.

and there churches standing rigidly for the doctrines declared to be "evangelical," which are nevertheless so pharisaical in their self-satisfaction, so marked by a willingness to criticize and condemn those who differ from them, that they seem largely to have lost the spirit of Jesus. Such churches are religiously unfruitful. There are others equally orthodox in doctrine which manifest a warm, persuasive, winsome spirit and are centers of genuine ministry to needy souls. The difference between the two is not due to doctrine. Again, there are some liberal churches which have become little more than esoteric clubs for the edification of a select group. But there are others in which a modernized interpretation of Christianity is the instrument of winning men to a devout consecration to Jesus Christ, and of building up a self-giving missionary spirit. To attempt to define evangelical Christianity by doctrinal tenets leads us only into confusion.

And yet this is the way in which the definition is usually made. Even so broad-minded a man as Garvie defines evangelicalism as "the mode of Christian thought in which emphasis is laid on salvation from sin by man's faith in God's grace through the sacrifice of Christ." As if evangelicalism were a "mode of thought"! The inadequacy of this definition is immediately betrayed by Garvie when he continues:

It is not committed to one plan of salvation or one theory of the Atonement; but may change and adapt its presentation of what to it is central in Christianity to the changing conditions and forms of thought. It should no more be bound in the fetters of its past than should "pure and undefiled religion" be discredited by the corruption or superstitions of savages, or modern astronomy by ancient astrology, even though the evangelicalism of the past, however defective it may appear to us now, was relative to the thought and life of its age, satisfying and efficient for goodness and godliness to many of the best men and women.¹

If, as Garvie insists, the doctrinal content of evangelicalism must change with the general changes of thought, it is futile to define it in terms of doctrine.

¹ Garvie, *The Evangelical Type of Theology*, p. 47.

A historical understanding of the development of this type of Christianity will throw light on certain aspects which doctrinal tests fail to reveal. The *spirit* of evangelical Christianity is quite as important as is its theology.

It is now generally recognized that the central emphasis in Luther's interpretation of Christianity was on the necessity for a genuine personal *experience* of religion. In the place of the word of the priest, absolving the sinner, Luther insisted on an experience of personal assurance of forgiveness. This emphasis has far-reaching consequences. If, as in the Catholic church, the most important thing is the authoritative word of a priest of the church, supreme stress will be laid upon the formal authority of the priest who pronounces the word of absolution, and the formal authority of the system which the priest officially administers. In Catholicism the all-important concept is that of *authority*. The Catholic justifies his beliefs and his official acts by an appeal to an original divine appointment. Christianity exists as a system of doctrines and rites carrying saving grace for all who will avail themselves of the divine provision. But the condition of salvation is submission to this authoritatively provided system. *Salus extra ecclesiam non est*. No one can be saved outside the church.

The Lutheran emphasis on a personal experience leads religious thinking in a very different direction. The power of Christianity is to be proved by asking what it accomplishes in the inner life of men rather than by asking whether it is authoritatively established. One of the most familiar expressions of this experimental testing of Christianity is Luther's famous statement in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, where he said: "Here is a true touchstone for testing all the books; the book which does not teach Christ is not apostolic, were St. Peter or St. Paul its author. On the other hand the book which preaches Christ is apostolic, were its author Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod." In other words, *the content which may be experienced is more important than the official character*

of the writer of the book. Consistently with this conception of religion Luther abolished the distinction between clergy and laity. There are no officially distinct administrators of Christianity upon whom all others must be dependent. A person's capacity to help others depends on the depth of his own experience, not on a special endowment of ordaining grace. In repudiating the conception of an authoritative church Luther logically appealed to the test of a living experience as supreme over claims of official appointment.

But the Protestant movement was compelled to defend itself. And the defense required both by the Roman church and by the current apologetics of the time was along the lines made familiar by centuries of Catholic theology. It was assumed that the sole valid form of Christianity is that officially established by Christ. Protestantism, in order to justify itself before the opinion of the world, was compelled to prove that Catholicism was a perversion of the original intent of Christ, while the evangelical form of Christianity was the type instituted by him. The appeal was more and more made to the authority of an original institution rather than to the evidence of a profounder religious life. Not that the latter was ignored. It was constantly stressed. But it was never permitted to take the first place in apologetics.

One consequence of this retention of the essentially Catholic theological method was the development of bitter doctrinal disputes between different branches of Protestantism. If there is only one authorized form of Christianity, each group in Christendom will, of course, seek to show that it alone holds the divine commission. Those who differ from it in doctrine or in polity must be denounced because they are seeking to operate with false credentials. A Protestant theologian has usually assumed that his main task was to prove the scriptural—that is the official—genuineness of the doctrines and polity held by his denomination. Such a method relegates the testimony of religious experience to a minor place.

The logical outcome of an appeal to authority is the employment of coercion against those who will not submit. Catholicism, with its practice of coercitive discipline, was entirely consistent here. Early Protestantism saw no objection to the use of coercion. Heretics or dissenters were subjected to imprisonment, torture, and even death. Authority simply *must* be recognized. To permit authority to be defied would be to give up authority entirely. Dissent must be treated as sin. The inner convictions of men must yield to the outer demands of the system. If actual coercion becomes impossible, dogmatic denunciations express the same spirit.

What is historically known as the evangelical movement in Protestantism—that awakening which manifested such power in the eighteenth century, and which has largely shaped our American Christianity—represents a different spirit. If we consider this movement in the Pietism of the Continent, the great Wesleyan revival, and the Great Awakening in America, we find that attention was given primarily to the creation of a profound religious experience. A characteristic feature of the pietistic revival under the guidance of Spener was the formation of what were called *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*—the organization of little voluntary groups of earnest Christians within the larger formal membership of the church, which met for devotional reading of the Bible and for mutual edification through testimony and prayer. The Bible was to be used to create religious life and love in the individual, instead of being regarded as an arsenal of weapons to be employed against heretics and nonconformists. The non-religious character of the elaborate theologies formulated by the traditional Protestant theologians was frankly recognized by the Pietists. One of them, on being inducted into a chair in the theological faculty of a university, is said to have declared that, while it was usually assumed that the duty of a theological professor is to take the Christian students who come to him and make theologians out of them, he intended to reverse the process. He

expected to take the young theologians who came to him and attempt to make Christians out of them.

Pietism, the Moravian Brethren, and the Wesleyan movement are all remarkable for their freedom from attempts to Christianize the world by compelling subjection to an official system. Persecutions and theological denunciations were largely left to the representatives of the established churches. For these evangelicals the all-important thing was to deepen religious experience in professed Christians, in order that the spiritual power of such lives might overflow in evangelical and missionary endeavor. Mrs. Jonathan Edwards wrote in 1740 concerning the preaching of Whitefield: "He makes less of the doctrines than our American preachers generally do, and aims more at affecting the heart."

It is, of course, true that the great preachers in the evangelical revival used doctrines already affirmed by Protestant orthodoxy, and that they insisted on the necessity of these doctrines in opposition to rationalistic theories. This fact has led to the common impression that the heart of evangelical Christianity is found in the insistence on certain crucial doctrines. The "evangelical test" employed in our modern Christianity is primarily doctrinal. But these doctrines alone do not distinguish the evangelical movement from the formal orthodoxy which evangelicalism condemned for its religious impotence. So far as these doctrines were concerned, they were taken for granted by Christians generally. What the evangelicals desired was not a peculiar theological system, but a deepening of the religious life on the basis of doctrines already accepted as true. The aim of evangelical preaching was to secure a personal experience of salvation in which the doctrines should become something more than mere intellectual affirmations.

In this connection it is significant that the organization of distinctively evangelical groups of Christians was almost entirely free from attempts to prove that the evangelical

group was the sole authoritative church. Pietism never sought to become a new church. It was a movement for the deepening of the religious life within the existing church. Count Zinzendorf was concerned for the cultivation of a warm personal experience of intimate spiritual fellowship with Christ, and had no wish to found a new sect which should enter into rivalry with other sects. The Methodist movement would have remained within the Anglican church if the Anglicanism of the day had been sufficiently elastic to permit the free expression of unconventional religious activities. The Methodist denomination has never put doctrinal tests first, but has always been looking for a deepened religious experience as the primary thing. Methodism has no "distinctive doctrines." It stands rather for a more profound religious experience of truths which are already presupposed.

In short, the religious power of evangelical Christianity is to be found in its inner spirit rather than in any particular system of doctrines. Theologically, in the eighteenth century, Christendom was divided into the Calvinistic and the Arminian bodies. But in the evangelical movement we find Calvinists and Arminians equally zealous and equally successful. Who would seek to do justice to Whitefield by calling attention to his Calvinism, and to Wesley by emphasizing his Arminianism? The common evangelicalism of these great preachers is far more important than their doctrinal divergences.

The evangelical movement was primarily concerned to create in each individual an experience of salvation which should generate love and devotion. Evangelicalism did not rely on the heavy hand of authority with its penalties and discipline. It sought rather to win the affections of men so that they should voluntarily give themselves to the cause of Christ. Instead of elaborating arguments to prove that Christ had committed the keys to some one ecclesiastical body, evangelicalism sought to present the message of salvation so persuasively that men would gladly trust in the saving grace of God in Christ.

Instead of setting up a new sect with claims of authoritative doctrine, evangelicalism sought to deepen the religious life in all the various branches of Christendom, using doctrines already taken for granted, and seeking to bring about a real personal experience of the meaning of these doctrines. Instead of being polemic, as were the formal sects of Protestantism, evangelicalism was irenic, interdenominational, democratic. If distinctive evangelical bodies were formed, it was usually because of the intolerance of a parent body rather than because of the desires of the evangelicals themselves. The spirit of evangelicalism is the spirit of loving persuasion in contrast to the spirit of a Christianity which exalts the idea of formal authority and proposes to penalize dissenters. Its motto might be expressed in the words, "Win the world to Christ," while the churches basing their claims on an authoritative foundation would say, "Conquer the world in the name of Christ." It is no accident that, while the standard churches were still disputing over questions of doctrine and polity, evangelicalism first made prominent the missionary enterprise.

If the analysis here given be correct, it throws light on the task of evangelical Christianity today. If it be true that evangelicalism represents an emphasis on a genuine and profound Christian experience rather than a reliance on a doctrinal system, the vitality of evangelical Christianity cannot be preserved by doctrinal disputations. Those who today are laying primary stress on the acceptance of specific doctrines, regardless of what happens to the inner life of men, are being led thereby to revert to the ideals and practices of the formal orthodoxy whose religious barrenness provoked the evangelical protest. We see reappearing all that apparatus of heresy-hunting which marked Christianity when the Roman Catholic spirit dominated the whole Christian world and the church was primarily concerned with rival claims of authority. In an age which is manifesting a deep longing for the union of Christian forces, and which is more and more ready to judge men

by their ways of living rather than on the basis of theology, we find the advocates of a doctrinally defined evangelicalism introducing division and urging Christians to line up in hostile camps. The attempt to preserve unchanged the doctrines with which evangelicalism operated so successfully in former centuries leads to formidable difficulties in an age when modes of thought and feeling have markedly changed. We ought clearly to recognize that when primary emphasis is laid on doctrinal conformity, even though the doctrines in question be precisely those which were affirmed by the earlier representatives of evangelicalism, men are in danger of losing the spirit of evangelicalism in the endeavor to save the outward form.

But if the strength of evangelical Christianity depends on persuasive appeal, there are one or two conditions which may well command our thoughtful attention. The great evangelical preachers in the past invited those whom they addressed to share with them a precious privilege. The experience of fellowship with God was something so real and so far-reaching in its consequences that they stood before their fellow-men conscious of possessing an inestimable spiritual treasure which they wished to share. No one can be a representative of evangelical Christianity unless religion is a precious personal possession.

It is in this connection that the hostility of evangelicalism to rationalism is to be understood. When the study of religion is primarily an intellectual pursuit, religion tends to lose its spiritual power. It more and more comes to be a form of philosophy to be contemplated with academic calm. But the religion which the evangelical knows is a revolutionary upheaval of the soul. A man discovers within himself a new self, strangely and awfully related to God. The new self dares to repudiate the comfort-seeking conventions of superficial human nature, and to consecrate itself to vast spiritual enterprises. For it relies no longer on the timid counsels of conventional prudence, but is strong with the courage inspired

by the consciousness that God works within the man of faith both to will and to do. It is the personal discovery that religion is a creative power in the inmost citadel of the heart that admits one to the fellowship of evangelical Christians.

But if the secret of evangelical power is to be found in a personal religious experience, which both humbles a man with a sense of his unworthiness in the presence of God and at the same time creates in him a faith which dares to aspire and to sacrifice, we need to heed a fact often overlooked. So profound an experience is possible only on the basis of an absolute honesty. It is here that the devotees of doctrinal regularity are blind to certain factors indispensable to Christian experience.

Several years ago George Kennan wrote of a winter's experience which he had in Jerry Macauley's mission in New York City. He told how one evening two young men from a respectable church came to the mission and testified in a perfectly correct fashion, using all the phrases dear to evangelistic fervor. But in the atmosphere of that prayer meeting the phrases somehow did not ring true. As soon as the testimonies had been given, Jerry Macauley quietly rose and said: "If you want to get religion and follow Christ, feel honestly and speak the truth. God hates shams." Kennan remarked that immediately everybody seemed to breathe more freely, as if the rebuke had cleared the whole spiritual atmosphere. Here was a noted evangelist who clearly saw that inner honesty was of more importance than doctrinal correctness. We are reminded of Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy.

"God hates shams." In the acceptance of the specific doctrines concerning the Bible and concerning the work of Christ which marked the work of the eighteenth-century evangelists there was no suggestion of sham. These men believed with all their heart in the truth of that which they professed. Moreover, they could assume on the part of their hearers an equally honest acceptance of these doctrines. They could be single-minded and therefore thoroughly consecrated.

There are noble and devout souls today who can repeat without any misgivings the creeds of a century and a half ago. We all know such whose purity of life and whose consecration to Christ make us feel very humble in their presence.

But there are others who have been led by their conscientious study of the facts to conceive the world and its laws, the nature of man and his relation to God, in terms consonant with our modern science and our modern social outlook. If God hates shams, what does a religious experience require on the part of these modern seekers after the truth? What does the spirit of evangelicalism suggest? Evidently that the aim of religion should be to deepen the experience of the spiritual realities implied in doctrines which are honestly accepted as true. That revised doctrines are capable of sustaining a humble and prayerful relation to God, a vital consecration to Jesus Christ, a growing sense of unity with the creative presence of the Divine Spirit within us, and a glad devotion to the Kingdom of God is an undeniable fact. It is equally true that in the hands of an irreligious spirit these revised doctrines may be turned into occasions for theological strife. Those who are honestly convinced that the revised theological conceptions so current in our schools of higher learning today are true should be on their guard lest they stop with mere intellectual assent. For a new theology is just as capable of religious barrenness as was the formal orthodoxy which evangelicalism confronted. The evangelical spirit will seek to interpret theology, whether old or new, as the expression of so profound and persuasive an experience of fellowship with God that Christianity shall be brought to the attention of men, not as a formal system, but as a Christlike way of living. Those who know the power and the joy of this way of life are the real representatives of evangelical Christianity.